

**Ordinary Time, 24<sup>th</sup> Sunday Year C: September 12, 2010 Homily**  
**GOD: THE RELENTLESS AND COMPASSIONATE GOOD SHEPHERD**  
**(Exodus 32: 7-11, 13-14; 1Timothy 1: 12-17; Luke 15: 1-32)**

Our retired bishop, Bishop James Griffin, spent a lot of time in Italy when he was studying for the priesthood. I once heard him talk about how sheep relate to their shepherds in the fields and hills of the Italian countryside. He said that many sheep stay close to the shepherd and would not let him get out of their sight. Others wander a bit from the shepherd but still were safely near by. Still others would venture further away, but the shepherd could still easily see them. A few wandered really far and almost out of the shepherd's view but he could with difficulty keep track of them if he strained his neck. Finally, one or two would risk getting lost completely and the shepherd or his dog would need to go after them and bring them back.

The observations of the bishop about shepherding remind us that it is risky to lose sight of Jesus. We his sheep are well-advised to stick really close to him and to his church. The different categories of sheep that the bishop describes are a reflection of real life in the Christian community. Some of us cling to Jesus; others wander a bit through sin; sometimes we may run away from his loving care because we have abandoned our Christian faith or have sinned grievously. But, as the Gospel for this Sunday makes clear, Jesus the Good Shepherd will do his best to stay close to us and he will go after us if we get lost. Jesus dogs us like a good sheep dog. He is the "Hound of Heaven" as Francis Thompson called the Lord in a famous poem which he wrote in the late 1800s by the same name. In these lines, the sinner tries to flee from Christ but the holy Feet keep following after: "... with un-hurrying chase, and unperturbed pace, deliberate speed, majestic instancy, they (the Feet) beat – and a Voice more instant than the Feet says – all things betray thee who betrayest me."

Even if we betray our God, he will not abandon us. The shepherd of the Gospel will track us down.

I encourage parents and grandparents to be aware of their call to shepherd their kids. Moms and Dads: do not underestimate the power you have to bring your children closer to Christ. And please, never lose sight of the importance of prayer to keep your family safe. Over the years, I have heard a number of confessions of young adults or even those closer to middle age who are returning to the church after being away for a while. I am always curious about what brings them back and so I will ask: "why today? Why did you decide to make a new start today?" Very frequently, the answer is: Mom or Dad or both told me they were praying for me; this touched me – and so here I am. Parents and grandparents: don't stop praying for your kids! It works! Your prayers spur on the Good Shepherd – the Hound of Heaven.

Our compassionate God is never mean when he finds us when we are lost or when we come crawling back to him. In the second part of today's Gospel, Jesus tells the beautiful Parable of the Merciful Father which was formerly called the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Pope John Paul II renamed this story to highlight God's profound compassion for us

humans. The great Dutch painter Rembrandt (van Rijn – 1606-1669) captured this gospel scene in a picture that shows the father embracing his penitent younger son with both hands. If you look closely at this painting, you can see that one of the father's hands is rough and masculine while the other one appears soft and feminine. This reminds us that God our Father is strong in his care for us and also gentle in welcoming us home when we stray. God is like Dad and Mom in one person – a loving parent who is the example for all earthly parents. In the summer of 2009, I had the opportunity to visit the interesting city of St. Petersburg in Russia where the original of Rembrandt's magnificent painting is on display in the Hermitage Museum there. I was thrilled to see it and spent a long time studying it.

I have also lived the mercy portrayed in this work of art – both as a sinner and as a priest who offers absolution in the person of Christ in confession. It is exciting from both ends. I also recall once when I was a freshman at St. Charles, I and another boy were caught where we were not allowed to be during lunch hour. (I will not say exactly where this was because I think it is still possible to go there and I don't want to tempt any current students at my alma mater to do something wrong.) Fr. Charles Haluska, the Dean of Men, caught us and I thought we were goners. We had to report to his office at the end of the day and we both sweat bullets the whole afternoon. When we stood before Fr. Haluska, we took different approaches. I said I was sorry and that it wouldn't happen again and Father immediately told me that I could go home. As I was leaving, my friend began to try to justify our actions and I learned later from him that he had to wash all the windows on our floor at St. Charles – which was about thirty windows! I probably said I was sorry more out of fear than true contrition, but Fr. Haluska graciously gave me the gift of feeling a bit like the Prodigal Son. I have many times since experienced God the Merciful Father in other, more serious situations with family and friends – and especially in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Before we even say we're sorry, God bestows his forgiveness on us.

May the Good Shepherd of the flock inspire us to stay close to him and to do our best to shepherd each other – beginning with our loved ones and extending to our neighbors, our friends, and especially those in need. And may the Merciful Father inspire us to show tenderness to all who have wronged us and to all who are beaten down by their sins; may we never judge but always show Rembrandt's God to others – the God who made us in his image, so strong and yet so gentle.